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AUTHOR Hunt, James W.
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ABSTRACT

Teachers working with at-risk students must instill in their students the motivation and desire to read. At-risk readers do not value reading in the same way their teachers do. Teachers should strive to make the reading experience one that is relevant to the student both at their present reading level and when their ability to read has improved. At-risk readers do not perceive reading as a search for meaning acquisition. Teachers must provide a learning environment that focuses on reading, thinking, and discussion rather than skills, workbooks, and mastery tests. Many at-risk readers are not aware of their own reading weakness. By providing students with reading materials that are slightly above their reading ability which focus on subjects of high interest to the students, at-risk readers will be reminded that they still have a way to go in becoming readers who can use reading as a means of unlocking information. At-risk readers enjoy being read to. Teachers should provide students with their own copies of the book being read; at-risk readers can gain immensely by following along while a good reader reads. At-risk readers are more motivated when they feel they have some control over the reading environment. Having students make predictions about a story before they read it provides a format in which students are reading to prove or disprove their predictions about the story, creating their own purpose for reading. (MG)

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Motivating At-Risk Readers: The First Step Toward Success

James W. Hunt

Southwestern University

Georgetown, Texas

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Running Head: Motivating At-Risk

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges facing teachers of at-risk readers is that of motivating their students to improve their reading ability. The following article provides observations and suggestions concerning the motivation of at-risk readers. The following areas are discussed in the article: (a) How at-risk readers value reading; (b) How at-risk readers perceive the reading process; (c) How at-risk readers perceive their reading ability; (d) at-risk readers and teacher's oral reading; and (e) at-risk readers and self-governance in the classroom.

Motivating At-Risk Readers: The First Step Toward Success

For teachers working with at-risk students, it is no secret that the first step they must take to improve the reading ability of their students is to instill in their students the motivation and desire to read. This first step, even though it may seem obvious, is without a doubt the most difficult challenge that teachers of at-risk students will face. As a teacher and researcher in an alternative school in northwestern Louisiana I was given the opportunity to work with a student population composed entirely of at-risk readers (ages 13 -16). It was in that setting that I came to realize the importance of providing an instructional environment that not only focused on reading instruction but, provided for the improvement of the motivational levels of the students. Based on my two years of teaching and research in this setting, I offer the following observations and suggestions for taking that first step of motivating at-risk readers and setting them on the path to success in reading.

1. At-risk readers do not value reading in the same way their teachers do.

Although this seems to be an obvious statement, it is a point that is overlooked by many teachers of at-risk readers. We assume that at-risk readers share our concern for creating a literate society and when they don't, we as teachers become very frustrated. After all, who would knowingly choose not to learn a skill that is essential to survival in the world today? I believe that the operative term in the last statement is knowingly. We should hope that most at-risk readers would want to learn to read if they really knew how important it was. Most at-risk readers do not value reading because the value of reading has yet to become apparent to them. To the at-risk reader, reading is something that happens in school and has very little relevance beyond the classroom setting. This lack of relevance can be blamed both on how reading is presented in the majority of today's classrooms and on a multi-media society which, in many ways, by-passes reading as a means of getting information that is necessary for survival.

So, how can we help at-risk students begin to

value the ability to read? The key factor is relevance. Teachers should strive to make the reading experience one that is relevant to the student at both their present reading level and in the future when, hopefully, their ability to read has improved. To accomplish this, teachers must be willing to familiarize themselves with many facets of their students lives (eg. music, fashion, sports, television, movies) and use this information as a basis for selecting reading selections. Many commercially prepared reading series have capitalized on this concept by developing reading materials that are labeled high-interest/low vocabulary. Language experience can also be highly effective for creating a relevant text which students are allowed to create from their own language background. As for making reading relevant to their future, teachers should surround at-risk readers with examples of how reading is a vital skill for survival in the adult world. Materials such as newspapers, catalogs, job applications, vocational textbooks, credit applications, and instruction manuals should be made available as examples of how reading ability is indeed a valuable asset for the future.

2. At-risk readers do not perceive reading as a search for meaning acquisition.

The majority of at-risk readers view reading as a mechanical process which revolves around the mastery of unrelated skills. The cause of this perception on the part of the at-risk readers is readily apparent when we review the common teaching practices in reading over the last twenty years. Reading instruction has been (and still is, for the most part) a skill based form of instruction that has focused more on the acquisition of skills and less on the acquisition of meaning or comprehension. This has been particularly true for instruction involving at-risk readers.

The approach taken with most at-risk readers has been to give them more, not less, skill based and workbook oriented instruction. This added focus on skills with at-risk readers can be attributed to several causes. First, there is the belief that if at-risk readers cannot perform successfully on the assigned skills, then the obvious answer is to give them more of the same until they get it right. Secondly, workbook assignments tend to keep at-risk readers (who often can present discipline problems) more "on-task."

This aspect of skill-based instruction is desirable to teachers who are expected to manage students who are functioning on many different reading levels. Unfortunately, this practice does not benefit the at-risk reader. Finally, at-risk readers receive more skill-based instruction because many teachers believe at-risk readers are incapable thinking on levels higher than those required to complete most skill assignments. This is true also of the types of questions asked of at-risk readers. Many teachers focus only on literal comprehension when asking questions of at-risk readers (Hansen & Hubbard, 1984) and, as a result, at-risk readers are given few opportunities to develop higher level thought.

It is apparent, therefore, that the failure of at-risk readers to view reading as a quest for meaning is a problem of our own creation. This being the case, it should be a problem which we can solve. Because at-risk readers enter kindergarten already "at-risk", this problem must be addressed from the earliest stages of exposure to reading. The current trend toward whole language and literature-based instruction has the potential to encourage reading for meaning among at-risk

readers by eliminating skill-based aspect of beginning reading instruction. For older students, the solution becomes a matter of changing the focus of their reading instruction. Teachers should communicate to students that the ultimate goal of the reading lesson is meaning acquisition not skill acquisition. This will first require a shift in thinking on the part of the teacher - a redefinition of what constitutes reading instruction. Once the teacher is secure in this shift of thinking, he or she can begin to communicate to students that the purpose of reading is to gain meaning from the author's words. Students should be made to realize that authors write for the purpose of communicating ideas and that the purpose of reading is the reception and assimilation of those ideas. Teachers should encourage students to think about what they read on levels beyond the literal level. The students may not be successful at first but, given time and exposure to higher level questions, they will improve. In short, teachers must provide a learning environment that focuses on reading, thinking, and discussion rather than skills, workbooks, and mastery tests.

3. Many at-risk readers are not aware of their own reading weakness.

In fact, many at-risk readers are convinced that their reading ability is sufficient and see little need for improvement. This was a phenomenon which I had not anticipated when I began my work with at-risk readers. I had assumed, as do most teachers, that at-risk readers (particularly older students) were quite aware that their reading abilities were not what they should be. To the contrary, I found that the majority of my students believed that they could read with sufficient proficiency. Indeed, a few of my students actually viewed their reading ability to be above average. In light of this phenomenon, it is easy to understand why many at-risk students are not motivated to put forth a great deal of effort to improve their reading ability.

In searching for a solution to this problem, I first began to seek an explanation for the phenomenon. Once again the I came to the conclusion that this problem was also of our own creation. However, unlike the problems arising from the undesirable practice of skill-based instruction, this problem arises from a practice

that is a desirable part of current reading instruction. One of the basic formulas in reading instruction is to place students in reading materials which will allow them to begin reading with some level of success. Students can then progress to higher levels as their ability to read improves thus avoiding the frustrations which would be inevitable in more difficult materials. This practice is very sound and I would not suggest for a moment that we should do otherwise, however, it is this very practice that creates the illusion among at-risk readers that they are indeed proficient readers. After all, they can read the materials that they are given in their reading classes. Even though the materials may be several years below the student's expected reading level, the student's perception is that he or she can read. The success that the student experiences from reading text on his or her own level may soon lead to over-confidence and a lack of motivation to progress further.

Solving this problem of over-confidence and subsequent lack of motivation can be a delicate issue. On one hand, the teacher wants the students to be aware that their reading ability is not up to

par but, on the other hand, the teacher must be protective of the students' self-esteem. Placing students in materials that are too difficult would demonstrate to them very quickly that they are not reading as well as they should, but such action would severely damage the fragile self-image of most at-risk readers. To achieve this delicate balance, the teacher should provide the students with reading materials on levels slightly beyond their reading ability which focus on subjects of high interest to the students. Your state's driving manual is an excellent example of this type of material (what teenage student isn't interested in learning to drive?). These materials should not be used for instructional purposes but, utilized as part of a recreational reading program. By exposing students to these materials, the at-risk reader will be gently reminded that, while they may be experiencing success in the reading program, they still have a way to go in becoming a reader that can truly use reading as a means of unlocking information in the world around them.

4. <u>At-risk readers enjoy being read to.</u>

It was hard for me to imagine that my students in the alternative school would enjoy being read to

as a class. My perception was that 16 year old students who probably had more "worldly experience" than I did would have little interest in being read to by their reading teacher. However, I was wrong and happily so. My students loved to be read to and this gave me the opportunity to demonstrate to my students that reading is an enjoyable experience not only for the reader but, also for those who share in the experience by listening.

When selecting books to be read to at-risk readers, the teacher should choose selections from the broad spectrum of literary styles and interest areas. Teachers should capitalize on this opportunity to expand the literary horizons of their students and expose students to types of literature that they would not seek out on their own. Upon occasion (and when possible), the teacher should provide students with their own copies of the book being read by the teacher. At-risk readers can gain immensely by "following along" while a good reader reads.

Teachers should approach this opportunity to read to at-risk readers with visible enthusiasm and read with expression equaled only by those individuals on the stage and screen. Because this

may be the only chance for at-risk readers to see someone model sophisticated reading behavior it is important that teachers put as much into reading to the class as they do into teaching the class.

5. At-risk readers are more motivated when they feel they have some control over the reading environment.

At-risk readers generally feel that they have very little control over the variables which comprise their reading environment. Classroom structures which do not allow at-risk readers to feel a sense of self-governance can contribute to overly passive behavior on the part of some students (Bristow, 1985) and hostile behavior on the part of others. A lack of self-governance can also contribute to a fear of failure which causes students to lose their motivation to try again when they fail in a task. According to Bracey (1989), students who have a strong internal locus of control are willing to try again when failure occurs. On the other hand, students with an external locus of control, as is the case with most at-risk readers, feel that trying again is pointless since the source of their failure is beyond their control.

The first step toward allowing at-risk readers the opportunity to develop a sense of self-governance in their reading environment involves allowing students to become a part of the decision making process of the classroom. This decision making can involve everything from the development of classroom rules and schedules to the selection of reading materials. The key to this type of structure is in the word "feel." Students should "feel" as though the have a say in what goes on. In other words, although the teacher is ultimately in control, the students can be made to feel that they are making a significant impact on the governance of the class. Allowing the students to make decisions about the reading environment creates a desirable atmosphere of cooperation in the classroom. This cooperation between the teacher and the students, as well as, cooperation among the students should be a paramount concern for teachers of at-risk readers.

At-risk readers must also be allowed to feel a sense of self-governance when it comes to the actual reading of a selection. The primary ingredient necessary for this task is directly involved with the student's purpose for reading a

particular selection. Most basal reading series provide students with a purpose for reading that usually does not give the student a strong desire to read the selection. Statements that begin with "read to find out ... " do very little to motivate the at-risk reader to actively read the selection. What does motivate at-risk readers is when they are allowed to set their own purposes for reading. It stands to reason that anyone would be more motivated to read when they are allowed to develop their own purpose for reading. Therefore, teachers of at-risk students must seek out instructional methodologies which allow students to set their own purpose for reading.

One of the most effective methods of allowing students to develop their own purpose for reading is through the use of prediction. Having students make predictions about a story before they read it provides an format in which students are reading to prove or disprove their predictions about the story and are, therefore, creating their own purpose for reading.

Part of my research at the alternative school involved an experiment designed to measure the effect of prediction instruction on the

comprehension abilities of at-risk readers (Hunt, 1987). During the course of the study I observed marked increases in the motivational levels of the experimental (prediction) group. Over a period of three weeks, utilizing the format of the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (Stauffer, 1975), students in the prediction group went from groaning at the length of the first story to all out contests to see who could be the most accurate in making predictions about the story. In fact, by the end of the study it became necessary to hide the stories during the day so that students could not get a clue to the next day's story (Hunt, 1988). The utilization of prediction as a teaching tool created a level of motivation beyond what I thought possible for those particular students.

In summarizing my observations, it is apparent to me that if we are to begin motivating at-risk students to become better readers, it is necessary to examine our own beliefs and conceptions of the teaching of reading. Many problems faced by at-risk readers are problems created not by the students, but by the reading environment in which they struggle to survive. Perhaps by raising our level of sensitivity to the uniqueness of at-risk

readers when can begin to understand the problem at hand and help to motivate these students to become functioning members of a literate society.

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